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ABSTRACT

This theme issue presents an overview of the standards movement, and examines some difficulties in implementing high standards in an equitable manner for all students. "Faster Than a Plymouth: Reflections on the 'Opportunity To Learn Standards'" (Bradley Scott) discusses the need to create similar experiences and opportunities for academic enrichment and support for all students, since all students are being held to the same standards of excellence and achievement. A sidebar gives a timeline of the modern standards-based reform movement. "Standards, Assessments and Accountability" (Albert Cortez) examines assumptions and realities of the standards movement and explores the challenges of implementing national and state standards at the local level. A sidebar lists five dimensions of learning incorporated in standards that reflect a comprehensive view of learning. "Standards, Tracking and the Reform of Our Public Schools" (Oanh H. Maroney) discusses societal problems that public opinion attributes to schools and the problems caused by ability grouping or tracking in standards implementation. A sidebar lists principles of equity in education. "High Achievement Zone: Reform at Work" (Olivia Evey Chapa) describes successful changes in a barrio middle school (Wynn Seale Academy of Fine Arts, Corpus Christi, Texas) as a result of academic standards. "Education Policy by Public Opinion Polls?" (Albert Cortez) points out the hidden dangers in misinterpreting public opinion polls and developing policy based on those polls, especially in bilingual education. (SAS)

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IDRA Focus:
High Standards

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ED 423 103

Faster than a Plymouth: Reflections on the "Opportunity to Learn Standards"

Bradley Scott, M.A.

Inside this Issue:

- Overview of the standards movement
- Deficit philosophy of tracking
- School succeeds with standards
- Danger in public opinion polls

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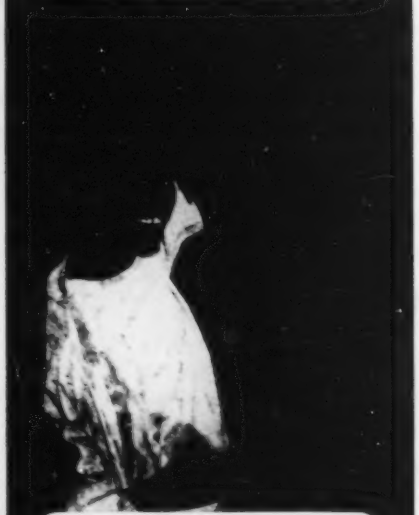

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It was actually supposed to be quite an uneventful return from Washington, D.C. I boarded the airplane after having attended one of the June round table discussions held by the U.S. Department of Education on the reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA). The discussions are being held around the country to give people an opportunity to address issues and make recommendations to the department for possible adjustments in the law that the department should present to Congress as it considers the reauthorization in 1999. I had been invited to participate because I direct one of the 10 regional desegregation assistance centers. There were about 24 of us in the group, not counting Department of Education staff.

The meeting was still very much on my mind as I sat there on the plane, occasionally watching as other people were finding their seats. A mother and her child struggled down the aisle. She was carrying entirely too much stuff to make her task easy. Five of us came to her aide while her son proceeded to explain to her why they were having such a difficult time with so much under tow. To my great fortune, they settled in directly behind me.

Actually, it was quite entertaining to listen to their conversation. It included a brief discussion of the sights they had seen and the historical places they had visited during their trip to the nation's capital. The mother patiently reviewed the experience with her son. She reminded him of the wonderful things they had done, the historic places they had visited and the memorable experiences they had encountered. I was thrilled just listening.

Their conversation fell silent as the little fellow (he appeared to be no more than five or six) looked around. He tried a few of the buttons and other gadgets available near his seat. Then he peered to his left, right, front and back.

Having completed the inspection of his surroundings, he turned toward his mother and asked, "How fast do you think this airplane will go?"

She answered, "Oh, pretty fast, I think. It has to get us and our luggage off the ground and all the way back home."

"Yes, I'll bet it will go really fast – probably faster than a Plymouth," he reflected.

"Do you think it will go *that* fast?" his mom asked in incredulous disbelief.

"Oh yes, I'm sure it might. We'll see."

The captain asked the attendants to be seated for take off, and we began our trek down the runway – faster and faster until we left the ground.

"Oh yes, I'm sure we're going faster than a Plymouth, and look, the houses look like little model houses!" he exclaimed.

The airplane kept climbing, kept reaching for higher and higher parts of the sky.

"Look, Mom, now the houses look like little doll houses, and the cars and trucks look like little ants and mice! And I was right! This plane is going faster than a Plymouth."

"It certainly is, honey. I'm so proud of you for figuring that out."

It was either a bolt of lightning or an incredible insight that hit me all at once. I stopped listening (eavesdropping) and be-

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gan to review what had just happened. In less than 10 minutes, this little fellow had reviewed a wonderful cultural and historical encounter in the nation's capital, created a hypothesis about the speed of the airplane which he was also able to test, conducted some comparisons as he examined houses, cars and trucks from various points of view, and carried on a discussion (or several of them) with a host of adults who were sitting around him.

What an incredible opportunity he was having to expand his learning. It was more than rudimentary. It was advanced, higher order thinking, and he was being challenged and encouraged to do it.

I thought to myself that I wished those people who were around that discussion table in the Washington, D.C., office could have been on the plane with me. If they had been, maybe the discussion on the reconsideration of the opportunity to learn standards would have unfolded very differently. Had they been there with me, they would have seen immediately what many of us have known and understood all along.

Some students come from experiences where they are presented with wonderful opportunities to learn. In their homes, in their schools, and in every other facet of their existences, they are presented with and involved in experiences that support their learning and achievement of high standards. The little fellow on the plane was one of these children.

Conversely, there are many more students who come from experiences that present them with little that assists their learning in schools and achieving high standards. If we do not create similar experiences and opportunities for academic enrichment and support but yet hold them to the same standards of excellence and achievement, we will fail those students.

All students should be held to the same high standards. We should not equivocate on that point. All students must be held to the same high standards. Similarly, all students must be given an opportunity to achieve high standards.

We have had this discussion before. The last time it occurred on a national level was in the early 1990s before the passage of the *Improving America's Schools Act*, which reauthorized the ESEA and set into motion the current push for high standards and student outcomes.

The discussion surfaced in Congress and in other circles such as a network of educational advocates, the National Coalition of Educational Equity Advocates (NCEEA).

The NCEEA produced a publication called *Educate America: A Call for Equity in School Reform* in which it outlined what should be included in the "Opportunity to Learn Standards." For them, these standards had to recognize and take into account not only educational content and outcomes in schools, but also the educational input and structural processes as well (see Page 8). The NCEEA articulated a philosophical view of educational equity that embraced what should have been the goal of school reform under the legislation that was being proposed and considered in Congress at the time:

> The advocates recognize a responsibility to provide schools with access to knowledge, training, technical assistance, consulting and other forms of support necessary to develop local and state capacity. To define and achieve these standards, it will be necessary to develop comprehensive federal human resource programs within the Department of Education and to find avenues for collaboration among federal, state and local education systems in a coordinated effort to meet the varied needs of children [learners] at their local schools (NCEEA, 1994).

The NCEEA also proposed three standards for consideration by Congress and state and local leadership.

- *Resource Standards* to assure that all schools have sufficient resources to deliver high-level curriculum content and to achieve higher levels of outcomes for all students.
- *Curriculum Delivery Standards* to assure high levels of curriculum delivery to all students.
- *Outcome and Capacity Building Standards* to assure that all schools have the continued capacity to deliver quality education and are evaluated by their

Faster than a Plymouth *- continued on page 12*

STANDARDS, ASSESSMENTS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Albert Cortez, Ph.D.

Over the last decade we have witnessed the emergence of a national movement to improve educational outcomes for all students. The movement was spurred by increasing public concern involving the quality of public education being provided to large numbers of U.S. students. This concern included government-sponsored reports such as *A Nation at Risk*, which was one of the first documents to trumpet the need for significant improvement in our public schools.

Following on the heels of these early efforts were national- and state-level reform initiatives that for the most part included the creation of "standards" of performance in certain core subject areas (reading, math, writing, science and, in some cases, social studies). These initiatives also included the development of corresponding testing programs to measure the extent to which those standards were being met.

The standards movement has been undergirded by some assumptions:

- A fundamental belief that the general public understands the performance standards and that the public concurs with the people who developed the standards on the levels of student or school performance that are eventually incorporated into such efforts.
- An assumption that data on a student's and/or school's progress toward reaching the prescribed standards is or can be made available to policy-makers, parents and the general public.
- An underlying belief that the data to be collected will actually include all (or most) pupils enrolled in schools.
- A faith that the availability of data on school and student performance will ultimately lead educators to develop and implement responses that result in improved student performance.

While standards offer many opportunities to achieve clarity of purpose and can contribute to improved school performance, the extent to which such improvement happens is significantly affected by the extent to which those standards are available to the various stakeholders in the system and the extent to which those stakeholders are vested in them.

Who Sets the Standards?

Many people consider it a good idea to develop common educational goals at the national level. A major problem with this concept, however, is that, unlike many other nations, U.S. education evolved as primarily a state-level responsibility. As such, states developed distinct ideas about education. They have long-resisted national intrusion in the design or implementation of state and local educational policy.

As a result, the federal government and national-level standards groups have focused efforts on either providing some general guidance on standards or attempting to develop standards generic enough to support or provide for easy alignment with state-level standards. Recent congressional decisions to forego the development of national tests in reading and mathematics reflect the state and local resistance to the "nationalizing" of education activities.

In turn, language in federal education

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DID YOU KNOW?

■ Standards are strong in all four subjects (English, history, math, science)
■ Strong in three subjects
Strong in two subjects
Strong in one subject or none
No standards for any subject

Standards vary state by state.
Examples:

HISTORY

STRONG *Describe how U.S. federalism was transformed during the Great Depression by the policies of the New Deal.*
WEAK *Identify and explain how events and changes occurred in significant historical periods.*

SCIENCE

STRONG *Describe the basic processes of photosynthesis and respiration and their importance to life.*
WEAK *Compare patterns of change and constancy in systems.*

Source: *Making Standards Matter 1997*, American Federation of Teachers.

Standards, Assessments - continued from page 3

legislation (particularly the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* [ESEA], which is the major vehicle for providing federal support for local education programs) emphasizes the importance of using federal resources to support ongoing or emerging state and local education reform efforts. At the state level, many states, including Kentucky, Connecticut and Texas, have developed very specific indicators outlining what it is they expect all students to know at every grade level. After developing their standards, the standards developers usually embark on campaigns to ensure that others (particularly school district and campus-level personnel) understand and buy into the standards.

Who Knows the Standards?

In reality most standards-based reform efforts are the product of a small handful of policy-makers. Very few of these legislators are aware of – let alone "understand" – what the student or school performance standards are or what constitutes the basis for them. Most of the educational standards that have been created for schools and students over the last decade have been developed by small groups of experts in specific areas who spend considerable time and energy on determining what it is all students should know or be able to do. These standards-setting efforts range from outlining a few basic ideas (as exemplified in the recent development of national education goals and subsequent educational priorities) to state-level activities that have created very specific expectations for students in every major subject area.

For many school-level personnel, the most direct encounter with national, state or local standards happens when they are briefed on student outcome expectations – that is, what their students are expected to know or be able to do by the year's end. In Texas these expectations are outlined in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), which are based on standards that were first developed in the mid-1980s in the aftermath of a legislatively mandated comprehensive school reform. The TEKS are currently in the process of being updated. Many states around the country have comparable curricular frameworks that in essence dictate what it is their students will be expected to learn over the course of a year.

The clarity of purpose included in such curricular standards is useful to policy-makers, educators, parents and the general public. Specifying clear expectations has the potential of having everyone develop a common base of understanding about schooling and what is expected to result from that experience for individual pupils.

HISTORICALLY, STUDENTS WERE THE ONLY ENTITIES HELD ACCOUNTABLE FOR ACHIEVING CERTAIN OUTCOMES. IT IS ONLY RECENTLY THAT THE PUBLIC HAS DEMANDED AND ACQUIRED AN ACCOUNTABILITY PROCESS THAT HOLDS SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS ACCOUNTABLE FOR THE OUTCOMES THAT THEY PRODUCE IN STUDENTS.

Unfortunately, experience has shown us that general understanding of state and local educational standards varies considerably within the various audiences noted. At the state level, most policy-makers do not delve into details of content mastery but tend to focus on aggregated data, such as the number or percent of pupils passing or demonstrating mastery on state testing measures.

On the other end of the spectrum, parents are concerned not with the specifics of their children's learning but with whether or not they demonstrated enough knowledge or mastery of a concept to pass the subject. Generally it is the teachers and building-level administrators who focus on the subcomponents of detailed knowledge or skills that collectively result in doing well in reading, mathematics or science tests.

In recent work on standards-based reform, IDRA noted that even the school-level personnel's knowledge of state and national standards varies extensively. While a small subgroup may be fairly well versed, other staff may have only a rudimentary grasp of critical standards targets. Moreover, community members are even less versed and need specially designed and targeted materials that would inform and educate them as a constituency.

Rather than worrying about what it is that students should know, conversations among many policy-makers ultimately tend to focus a lot of time and energy on determining who has passed or not passed the new standard. Texas was a notable exception, spending years convening groups of educators to help define what it was that students should be expected to learn and in what areas they should show competence. Even in Texas, however, only a handful of specialists ultimately grew to know and understand the rationale behind what it is students were expected to learn and demonstrate "mastery" in.

Who is Expected to Meet the Standards?

Fueling the creation of standards is a broad-based commitment to finding out how students are doing after spending nine or 10 months attending public schools. This expanded concern with knowing how schools are performing may have been caused by an array of large-scale research efforts that informed the public and policy leaders that many schools were not doing as well as most people had assumed. Or were they?

In the latter half of the century, many educators had become increasingly aware that while *they* had not changed much, the composition of the *student populations* they were serving were gradually changing. With the movement of the population from the small towns and rural communities to the larger cities and the shift of our economy from an agrarian to an industrial base, schools were faced with significant increases in the numbers of pupils who stayed in school beyond the elementary level.

Schools were also challenged by growing numbers of recent immigrants drawn in by promises of greater economic opportunities. And, unfortunately, the schools were often less than successful at effectively serving these more diverse populations. So why were we not concerned with standards, performance or accountability back then?

Well, the economies of those eras not only tolerated lower standards, in some cases they even required unskilled or nonliterate workforces. Thus, the schools' abilities to sort out some and educate the few were well suited to their task. Problems for schools began to mount only as the needs of a post-industrial economy, emerging in the 1940s and 1950s and in full bloom by the 1960s and 1970s, required a much more effective public education system than what had been tolerated to date. These new expectations often took the form of standards, so as to clarify to all major constituencies – educators, policy-makers and the general public – what was expected to be achieved by schools and by students in exchange for the investment of public monies in those

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STANDARDS, TRACKING AND THE REFORM OF OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Oanh H. Marroncy

Over the years, education reform has been a much-talked-about topic. Individuals from many walks of life – educators, politicians, community leaders, religious leaders, business leaders – have all become involved in the conversation. They agree on the fact that public schools are in need of improvement. However, the conversation surrounding how to go about improving our nation's public schools has gone in many different directions.

Education continually finds itself subject to "quick-fix" remedies proposed to alleviate public education of all its current ills. These proposed solutions run the gamut from alternative class schedules and school year calendars, to curricular reform, to even doing away with public schools altogether.

Public opinion plays a critical role in the maintenance of our public schools. Because we continually hear statistics about the abilities and performance levels of our nation's students, some people believe that public schools have failed completely. The perception is that public schools are riddled with problems that are unfixable. Interestingly, many of the problems that parents cite as reasons for removing their students from public schools and placing them in private and/or religious schools are societal problems, not problems within the institution of education.

The *Digest of Education Statistics 1997* cites data from "The Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools" (NCES, 1998). The major problem cited most by respondents in the 1996 survey was "use of drugs" (16 percent), followed by "lack of discipline" (15 percent), which has consistently remained a highly cited problem. "Fighting/violence/gangs" (14 percent) and "lack of financial support" (13 percent) were ranked as the next highest among the list of major problems facing public schools. Three percent of the respondents for the 1996 poll cited "poor curriculum/standards" as a major problem facing the local public schools. Data were not available to indicate what percentage of respondents felt "standards/quality of education" is a major problem.

As can be seen from the results of the poll, those problems perceived to be the most threatening are those that exist in the larger society and come to school with the students and educators – they are not caused by the schools. There are many institutional problems that exist in education. However, the problems that our public schools and their students face are rooted in the outdated, prejudiced beliefs of the larger society.

AS A RESULT OF SCHOOLS' LOW EXPECTATIONS OF STUDENTS WHO ARE DEEMED LESS LIKELY TO SUCCEED ACADEMICALLY, SCHOOLS SUBJECT THESE "LESS LIKELY TO SUCCEED" STUDENTS TO LESS CHALLENGING, WATERED-DOWN, CONNECT-THE-DOT CURRICULA.

The Context for Reform

In 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education, created by Secretary of Education T.H. Bell, published a report called *A Nation at Risk*, which said:

> Our nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world... We report to the American people that while we take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people (NCES, 1995).

Based on the findings of its study, the commission put forth a series of recommendations that were designed to improve education. As a result of the report and the implementation of the commission's recommendations, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that "42 of the 50 states had raised course requirements for high school graduation, [and] 47 states had mandated testing standards" (1995).

A Nation at Risk has spurred much activity in the arena of education reform. Our nation has put forth newer and higher goals for educating our children. A major part of the conversation about improving the quality of education that our public schools provide to students is the notion of high standards: upping the ante on what students must know.

Population Sifting

One of the issues that has long been included in conversations about education reform is *ability grouping*. Known also as *tracking*, ability grouping has been implemented in our schools since the early part of the century. It was seen as a solution to the diversity that existed once schools began to serve a larger, more heterogeneous population of students who were not all college-bound. The general idea was to divide students by ability (e.g., low, average and high achieving students) so that they could receive the appropriate level of guidance needed to achieve academically.

Through tracking, schools have become agents for maintaining the social hierarchy that exists in our nation. White, more-affluent students are often placed in courses for high achieving students. In essence, they remain at an advantage for access to knowledge that, in turn, provides them access to post-secondary education and more-affluent jobs.

Minority students and students from low socio-economic groups tend to be overrepresented in the lower tracks, which include vocational courses that do not provide the necessary job skills to enter the work force and lower-level academic classes that do not meet the entrance criteria for post-secondary education. Such differences in access to knowledge have, for the most part, not been challenged because the groups being denied this access have been denied equitable access to opportunity (within and outside of the field of education) for many decades, anyway. Years after we emerged from the Civil Rights era, our nation's schools continue to select and sort students, distinguishing the "haves" from the "have nots" and perpetuating the social hierarchy (Robledo Montecel, 1996). Jeannie Oakes, a well-known opponent of tracking, notes:

> Tracking is just one of many problematic school structures and practices. Tracking supports and is

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> supported by much else that is wrong with the schools – thin, skills-based curricula; passive, teacher-dominated instructional strategies; [and] standardized, paper-and-pencil assessment (Wheelock, 1992).

Interestingly enough, when queried about what they felt was the most important goal for education, public school teachers said: "building basic literacy skills" (49.9 percent), "promoting personal growth" (20.4 percent), "promoting good work habits and self-discipline" (13.2 percent) and "encouraging academic excellence" (11.1 percent) (Snyder, Hoffman and Geddes, 1997).

In examining the percentage of high school seniors who reported that they were in a general (includes special education, "other" and "don't know"), college preparatory/academic or vocational program, NCES (1997) reports the following:

- Over the 10-year span between 1982 and 1992, the percentage of public and private school students reporting enrollment in a general or college preparatory/academic program increased (from 35.2 to 45.3 percent and from 37.9 to 43 percent, respectively), while the number of students reporting enrollment in a vocational program decreased (from 26.9 to 11.7 percent);
- For public school students, general program enrollment increased from 36.7 to 47.1 percent, college preparatory/academic program enrollment increased from 34.5 to 40 percent, and vocational program enrollment decreased from 28.8 to 12.9 percent;
- When considering socio-economic status, the students in the "high quartile" comprised the majority of college preparatory/academic program students (60.1 percent in 1982 and 60.8 percent in 1992). Students in the "low quartile" comprised the larger part of the general program (40.3 percent in 1982 and 55.6 percent in 1992) and the vocational program (39.2 percent in 1982 and 21.1 percent in 1992).

Ability grouping is directly related to the issue of curriculum standards. Tracking, as it has been implemented in schools, subjects students to different sets of standards according to the ability group track in which they are placed. And while the curriculum and learning objectives for the various ability group levels are intended to meet the students' varying ability levels, those students who are placed in the lower-ability-level groups are often subjected to unchallenging, watered-down, basic skills curricula that barely meet minimum-level standards.

The National Education Goals Panel was created in 1990 to assess progress toward achieving the nation's eight national education goals. The third goal, "student achievement and citizenship," states:

> By the year 2000, all students will leave grades four, eight and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography, and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our nation's modern economy (National Education Goals Panel, 1997).

WE MUST CHANGE THE "SELECT AND SORT" PHILOSOPHY THAT IS INHERENT IN THE STRUCTURE OF OUR SCHOOLS... WE MUST REALIZE THAT WE DO NOT HAVE TO PROMOTE FAVORABLE ACADEMIC OPPORTUNITY AND SUCCESS FOR SOME STUDENTS AT THE EXPENSE OF COMPARABLE OPPORTUNITY FOR OTHERS.

In the panel's 1997 report, we find that in Texas:

- Twenty-six percent of the public school students met the goals panel's performance standard in reading in grade four, compared to 30 percent of public school students in the nation; and
- Twenty-five percent of the public school students met the goals panel's performance standard in math in grade four, and 21 percent met the performance standard in math in grade eight, compared with 21 percent and 24 percent of students in the nation, respectively.

The *Condition of Education 1997* reports that more students are taking higher-level math and science courses:

> High school graduates in 1994 were more likely to take mathematics courses at the level of Algebra I or higher and science courses at the level of biology or higher than their counterparts in 1982 (Smith, et al., 1997).

The report also notes that 51 percent of high school graduates in 1994 had earned at least four units in English, and three units in each of science, social studies and mathematics. However, students still needed to enroll in remedial courses upon entrance to college: "One out of three college freshmen enrolled in a remedial course in either year. More students took remedial mathematics in 1995 than either remedial reading or remedial writing" (Smith, et al., 1997).

Of the more than 41.6 million students attending public schools in 1993-94, 10.88 percent (4,528,437 students) were enrolled in a remedial reading program, and 6.9 percent (2,871,895 students) were enrolled in a remedial mathematics program (NCES, 1998). While most of the students enrolled in these programs were at the elementary level, there were still approximately 774,000 (5.63 percent) students enrolled in remedial reading and approximately 692,000 students enrolled in remedial mathematics at the secondary level.

Preliminary data from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) Student Assessment Division show that, statewide, 80 percent of the students who took the Biology I end-of-course exam in spring 1998 met the minimum expectations. However, only 39 percent of the students who took the Algebra I end-of-course exam during the same term met the minimum expectations. Although far from satisfactory, these preliminary data demonstrate an increase in performance in Algebra I from previous years, 28 percent passing in 1996 and 35 percent passing in 1997 (TEA, 1997). These percentages are important because "mastery of Algebra is a strong indicator of preparation for college. Algebra I is a required course for high school students, beginning with the freshman class of 1997-98" (TEA, 1997).

Standards and Tracking

As is well known, educators' expectations affect student performance. Regardless of students' individual abilities, educators' attitudes about their jobs, the subject matter and the students whom they teach are, essentially, everything.

In a study of 38 schools in 13 communities, John I. Goodlad found that teachers tended to believe that ability grouping itself takes care of pupil variability. These teachers saw the vocational education offerings as valuable job preparation for

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those students who were not college-oriented and had no chance of going to college. Goodlad also found that an achievement gap between ability levels persists, and even increases, over time: "A self-fulfilling prophecy appearing to 'prove' the prevailing assumptions is created... result[ing] in giving up on many individuals" (1984).

As a result of schools' low expectations of students who are deemed less likely to succeed academically, schools subject these "less likely to succeed" students to less challenging, watered-down, connect-the-dot curricula.

> Historically, while we have reached for common standards, we have also made adjustments in standards in response to individual differences among students. This is seen in the enormous variability in academic expectations by school, by classroom, as well as within classrooms, and by type of child – often on the basis of ethnicity, language, economic means, gender, disability, and simply average and below average placement in the achievement hierarchy (Weinstein, 1996).

Tracking mirrors the beliefs that are held about particular groups in the larger society. Many research studies on tracking concur:

> Assignment to different pathways has been found to reflect racial, class and gender groupings, even when differences in ability have been controlled. Thus, poor children, certain ethnic-minority children, and girls in math and science are often the recipients of lower expectations. Evidence points to limited mobility once placed; to remarkably different curricular exposure between reading groups, tracks and schools, with achievement gains largely favoring students in the higher levels; to the ineffectiveness of retention practices; and to the dead-end nature of some special education programs. Research also underscores students' awareness of such differential treatment, a factor in the stigma, eroded motivation, and disidentification associated with low group placement (Weinstein, 1996).

In addition, many of these studies have also found "compelling evidence that when students are placed higher *and given appropriate supports*, they rise to the challenge with no detriment to the higher achieving students" (Weinstein, 1996).

Much of what we hear every day is that our youngsters are not leaving our schools with the knowledge and skills that they need to be competitive in a global market. Many would argue that all students should be governed by the same set of high standards. This is, indeed, a valid argument. However, if we want all of our students to be governed by the same set of high standards, it will be necessary to level the playing field.

All students need to have access to high-quality teachers who share high expectations for every student because

> Even the most pedagogically advanced strategies are ineffective in the hands of educators who believe that ethnic, racial and linguistic-minority students are at best culturally disadvantaged and in need of fixing or, at worst, culturally or genetically inferior and, consequently, beyond help (Trueba and Bartolome, 1997).

In addition, students need exposure to a challenging, high quality curriculum – one that goes beyond the premise of limited basic-skills learning. Rhona S. Weinstein, states very clearly the issues at hand:

> Calls for the raising of standards (however meaningful) and for the accountability of offenders (however implemented) fail to grapple with the complexity of what is currently in place in schools and the systemic changes needed to fix the problem. Attention must be paid to changing limiting beliefs about differential abilities to learn and the self-defeating teaching methods that follow from such beliefs. These have led to the inappropriate adjustment of teaching methods (watered-down treatment) for certain groups of children, thereby creating enormous inequities in the conditions for learning. Three missing links in the equation (confronting entrenched beliefs, implementing effective teaching methods, and engaging in a change process) are essential to ensuring the fulfillment of the declared prophecy of higher standards for all children (1996).

Conclusion

There are several questions that must be considered in this particular discussion: Is it feasible to believe that it is possible to effectively improve the quality of public education simply by raising standards? Is it likely that merely raising standards will raise the level of expectation held for all students in public schools? Will increasing learning standards with out emphasizing a change in course curricula be beneficial for students? Is it acceptable to continue to sort students into ability-level tracks and provide them with unchallenging curricula that less-than-adequately prepares them to compete in a global society? To all of the questions posed, the answer is a resounding "no."

Raising standards by which students are expected to perform is a step in the right direction. This must be done. However, in order to ensure that all students are given a

Standards, Tracking *- continued on page 8*

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Standards, Tracking *- continued from page 7*

truly equitable opportunity to achieve academic success in our public schools, we must do several things. We must change the "select and sort" philosophy that is inherent in the structure of our schools. We must instill an understanding in the philosophy of public education that while different students possess different abilities, all students have the potential to achieve academic success, given high expectations and a challenging curriculum. We must realize that we do not have to promote favorable academic opportunity and success for some students at the expense of comparable opportunity for others.

We know that our public education system has problems. However, the solution is not to do away with public education. Nor is the answer to implement "quick-fix" remedies that do not adequately address the issue of equity for all students in our public schools. Despite what many might believe, the problems that exist in our public schools are fixable. And we can fix them, once we properly acknowledge just what it is that needs fixing.

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EDUCATE AMERICA: A CALL FOR EQUITY IN SCHOOL REFORM

The following is an excerpt of the recommendations outlined in *Educate America: A Call for Equity in School Reform.* This report was developed by the National Coalition of Educational Equity Advocates in 1994 with assistance from the desegregation assistance center network, including the IDRA *Desegregation Assistance Center – South Central Collaborative for Equity.*

Federal equity support comes primarily as financial assistance for student groups identified as in need of supplemental services, as anti-discrimination laws and as technical assistance to change discriminatory practices. Equal opportunity to learn is sought through programs to compensate educational "deficits" of students disadvantaged or put at risk because of some social characteristic, most often poverty. It is also sought through "special populations" programs (e.g., bilingual education programs, special education and rehabilitative services) to benefit groups historically experiencing discrimination. But *equity in regular programs and services*, without which "supplemental" assistance means little, is the object of virtually no federal effort.

Both federal and state efforts for historically discriminated populations need to be maintained, not only to ensure that the special needs of each group are met but also to enable us to learn from the special strengths of each group. But much greater coordination within and across assistance programs is needed to make equity a fundamental issue of all education. No current federal or state program exists to assure the interconnections between educational equity and excellence. What is lacking is a coordinated strategy to lead and support state and local creation of schools that limit no child's opportunity to learn to the highest standards. Such a strategy must seek integration of fundamental components of systemic reform that includes the principles and actions presented below.

Principles of Equity in Education

- Each student must be provided powerful curricula through adequate instructional and support systems to give him or her the opportunity to learn and the expectation to learn to the highest content and performance standards established for other students in his or her school, district and state.
- Each family and community within a local education agency's jurisdiction must have access to the information, health and social services, and the participatory opportunity ties necessary to assure their children's well being and contribute to their school success.
- Each school must have financial, material and programmatic resources adequate to provide each student an opportunity to learn to the highest standards established for the district, the state or the nation. Measures of resource adequacy must take into account student characteristics, the cost of relevant effective practices and geo-economic factors.
- Teachers and other educational professionals must have the commitment, knowledge and skills to provide all students with an opportunity to learn to the highest established standards. This must include male and female students of diverse racial, ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and those who are gifted, talented or have disabilities.
- Assessment and testing instruments and practices must be fair and unbiased, aligned with curricular content and learning opportunities, and used to inform instruction. They must not be used to foreclose students' opportunity to learn to the highest standards.

The absence of any one fundamental component of systemic reform can defeat any district or school's efforts to provide equitable high quality education. Action to create and integrate them is needed at the federal, state and local levels.

Excerpted from **Educate America: A Call for Equity in School Reform,** ***the National Coalition of Educational Equity Advocates (Chevy Chase, Maryland: The Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium, 1994) with permission. For a copy of the full publication call the Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium, 301-657-7741, or the New England Desegregation Assistance Center at Brown University, 401-351-7577 (or see www.nwrel.org/cnorse/booklets/educate).***

Dr. Olivia Evey Chapa

HIGH ACHIEVEMENT ZONE: REFORM AT WORK

I have been fortunate throughout my life to have opportunities to explore, develop and refine my quest for excellence, which I explain to my students as reaching for the stars. Granted, many teachers encourage their students to reach for the stars. So why was I asked to write about my experiences? For the past four years, I have been a teacher in a barrio school that has received state, regional, national and international recognition for the successful changes created through middle school reform and academic standards.

Wynn Seale Middle School Academy of Fine Arts is located in Corpus Christi, Texas, in a typical barrio – predominantly Hispanic, economically challenged and highly transitory. In 1993, the Texas Education Agency designated the school "low performing," indicating unacceptable scores on the state standardized test and leading to the changes that transformed the school.

With community support, Corpus Christi Independent School District (ISD) changed the school into a neighborhood magnet school with a fine arts focus. Mr. Richard Peltz was selected as the principal, and he hired an exclusively selected, virtually new staff that was committed to change and to the total welfare of the students.

Middle school reform is multifaceted, and the changes implemented at Wynn Seale Academy of Fine Arts were varied. The "house" concept was initiated to create a nurturing environment for the students. Two teachers were assigned to a group of approximately 60 students instructing two core subjects each – language arts and history or science and math – in a modified block schedule. The curriculum was aligned both vertically across grade levels and horizontally within each grade level to provide instructional focus and flexible teaching schedules in the houses. Instructional collaboration, both in the houses and within subject areas, was initiated as part of the change process.

Another change is reflected in the name selected for the academy – that is, a focus on fine arts. The hand-selected staff included fine arts teachers who were deemed outstanding, not only in the courses usually offered in middle schools such as the visual arts, drama, choir and band, but also in orchestra, piano, computer art and dance. To coordinate instruction, Mr. Steven Bennett was hired as the dean of fine arts. A program called Orbit rotates sixth graders through seven arts disciplines – visual arts, drama, choir, piano, band, orchestra and dance – throughout the year to explore fine arts courses they may wish to pursue. Seventh and eighth graders are scheduled into two elective classes each year. Another aspect of the focus, the Arts as Core Enrichment (ACE), pairs a fine arts specialist with selected house teachers in each grade to connect art experiences with academic skills.

While middle school reform was being implemented the first year, another important change was occurring in Corpus Christi ISD – the creation of district-wide academic standards. In 1992, the school district took the first steps by conducting meetings in which literally thousands of people (community leaders, business representatives, college and university educators, parents, and teachers) were consulted concerning the skills and knowledge required to progress toward graduation and into the "real world." The result was a document, *Real-World Academic Standards*, that incorporates the U.S. Department of Education's *Goals 2000*, existing national standards, the state-adopted Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), and advanced placement and college entrance examination expectations.

Each grade level in each subject area is guided by the academic standards that include (1) *content standards* identifying what students should know and be able to do, and (2) *performance standards* defining what students will do to demonstrate achievement of content standards. They were pilot-tested in selected schools in the 1995-96 school year, and by the next school year, all schools were required to implement the academic standards.

The changes initiated as part of middle school reform are visible throughout the academy. Teachers create a nurturing environment and work cooperatively to ensure student success. However, there are smaller changes that assist in the process. Teachers are called "transformational leaders," reinforcing the expectations of their primary function. Uniform rules across the school inform students that teachers expect "academy behavior."

Equally important is the rule that states, "Finished work must be of the highest possible quality." There is a daily infusion of appropriate academy behavior as the principal announces: "Act right, do your best and treat others as you would like to be treated." Banners and posters fill the halls with high expectations of academy students: "Academic standards will take you to the top!" "Without imagination, thought comes to a halt!" and "Human beings make art, and art makes human beings."

The changes created by the academic standards are visible throughout the academy. Transformational leaders post the academic standards prominently in their classrooms along with learning maps and thematic concepts connecting the academic standards and core subjects. The key to creating the optimum learning environment provided by the academic standards is instruction that stresses higher order thinking skills and concepts connecting to the real world. The essential force behind the academic standards is that learning is not a mystical process; all students can identify what they must know and how they must demonstrate their knowledge. Empowering students and their parents is perhaps the most crucial element of academic standards.

The results of implementing middle school reform and academic standards at the academy were extremely significant. On the 1994 Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), 50 percent of the school's students passed in reading, 47 percent passed in writing and

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24 percent passed in math. By 1997, 82 percent of the school's students passed in reading, 85 percent passed in writing and 73 percent passed in math. Once ranked in last place out of 12 middle schools in the district, by the third year of the academy reforms, the school ranked third in the district.

The outstanding accomplishments at Wynn Seale Academy of Fine Arts have not gone unnoticed. In 1997, the Texas Middle School Association acknowledged the academy as the "Region II Outstanding Middle School." In 1998, the Texas Magnet School Association named the academy a "Texas Exemplary Magnet School," the only neighborhood magnet school receiving this distinction.

In addition, numerous educators have visited the school, including a delegation from Japan. Positive media coverage occurs regularly, including an April 8, 1997, news article in *USA Today* that cites the academy as an example and states that Corpus Christi ISD's focus on academic standards "has made this south Texas port city virtually without equal nationwide." In 1998, at the Texas Education Association's Mid-Winter Conference, Governor George Bush, Jr. singled out the academy as upholding the highest standards and striving to create "the best-educated students in the nation."

Living up to its mission statement, "Success through body, mind and spirit," Wynn Seale Academy of Fine Arts endeavors, through middle school reform and academic standards, to develop students into independent and collaborative learners, critical and creative thinkers, capable and successful problem-solvers, effective and competent communicators, and quality performers and producers. Reaching for the stars occurs on a daily basis in every classroom at Wynn Seale Academy of Fine Arts.

Dr. Olivia Evey Chapa teaches seventh and eighth grade Spanish at Wynn Seale Middle School Academy of Fine Arts (a 1998 Texas exemplary magnet school) in Corpus Christi. Corpus Christi schools' standards-based reform initiative is funded by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. The foundation also funded IDRA to assist the school district in partnering with community-based organizations to conduct outreach and inform parents about school reform.

HIGHLIGHTS OF RECENT IDRA ACTIVITIES

In June and July, IDRA worked with **7,719** teachers, administrators and parents through **111** training and technical assistance activities and **143** program sites in **13** states plus the United Kingdom. Topics included:

- STAR Center *Excellence and Equity through Technology Network* (EETNet)
- Action Planning to Support the Campus Improvement Plan
- Learning Centers
- Reading Process
- English as a Second Language (ESL) and Oral Language Development
- *United States and Mexico Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Regional Summit*

Participating agencies and school districts included:

- Chicago Public Schools
- Harlandale Independent School District (ISD), Texas
- Arkansas State Education Agency
- Corpus Christi ISD, Texas
- South San Antonio ISD, Texas
- Deer Park ISD, Texas
- Texas Education Service Center, Region XIX

Activity Snapshot

The *STAR Center* has co-sponsored three bi-national conferences where researchers and practitioners from the U.S.-Mexico border region shared and planned strategies for addressing the drug problem in schools. The STAR Center is the comprehensive regional assistance center funded by the U.S. Department of Education to serve Texas. The first *United States and Mexico Safe and Drug-Free Schools Regional Summit* was co-sponsored by the Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse, the U.S. Department of Justice and several other organizations and federal agencies. It was held in El Paso with more than 300 participants including officials from the two countries' education and justice departments. The second conference was held in Yuma, Arizona, and the third in San Diego with a combined total of 70 participants. The STAR Center's role included helping to design the conferences themselves, preparing facilitation guides, facilitating workgroup sessions, coordinating exhibits and disseminating information (including translation). The STAR Center is developing a summary of the proceedings and strategies developed that schools and community-based organizations can use to assist in creating schools that are safe and drug-free. The STAR Center is a collaboration of IDRA, the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin, and RMC Research Corporation.

Regularly, IDRA staff provides services to:

- public school teachers
- parents
- administrators
- other decision makers in public education

Services include:

- training and technical assistance
- evaluation
- serving as expert witnesses in policy settings and court cases
- publishing research and professional papers, books, videos and curricula

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EDUCATION POLICY BY PUBLIC OPINION POLLS?

Albert Cortez, Ph.D.

In a recent Associated Press (AP) article, reporters summarized the results of a newspaper poll conducted by the *Houston Chronicle* on public opinion of bilingual education in Texas. The headline read, "In poll, most Texans favor limited or no bilingual ed." A review of the data presented, however, leads one to question the accuracy of that headline's conclusion.

The newspaper article did not print the specific wording of the questions used, an important omission since the phrasing is known to significantly affect people's responses. However, the report suggests that Texans seem split on the value of providing native language instruction for pupils while developing their proficiency in English.

According to the AP report, 48 percent of 801 Texans polled (randomly, one assumes) indicated that they opposed "long-term" bilingual education; however, 44 percent held the view that native language support should be provided as long as such assistance is needed.

The headline, then, is an interpretation. Furthermore, it is an overstatement of the poll results and representative of the biased interpretations of data that have recently characterized the public debate on appropriate ways of educating students identified as having limited proficiency in English.

A closer look at the poll results indicates that, in truth, only 25 percent of the individuals polled believed that limited-English-proficient (LEP) students should receive no bilingual instruction before being placed in English-only programs (i.e., only one in four Texans expressed outright opposition to providing native language support while a student learns English).

On the other hand, 27 percent believed in providing at least one year of native language instruction to facilitate a student's transition into the all-English curriculum. And 38 percent of the Texans polled actually believed in the efficacy of providing three or more years of bilingual instruction while LEP students developed greater English fluency.

One could say from these numbers that (if one assumes no overlap in the two respondent groups), 65 percent of Texans indeed supported the use of native language instruction for LEP students (acknowledging that opinions differed concerning the number of years that might be provided).

CERTAINLY, INDIVIDUALS WOULD NOT WANT PUBLIC OPINION TO BE USED TO GUIDE DOCTORS IN DECIDING A COURSE OF TREATMENT FOR A RELATIVE OR FRIEND. SIMILARLY, PUBLIC OPINION SHOULD NOT BE USED TO FRAME APPROPRIATE INSTRUCTION FOR ANY STUDENT.

As this alternative interpretation illustrates, one's reporting of poll "results" can be affected by one's stance on the issues. The poll also reflects that, contrary to popular perceptions, some Texans (like many others around the country) are unsure of their position on how to best educate LEP pupils, with 10 percent reported as undecided. The poll had a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percentage points.

Critics of bilingual education may jump to the conclusion that there is major opposition in Texas to providing native language instruction to students developing English proficiency. A look at the data, however, reveals that while there may be a split in the opinions polled, a significant number of Texans are supportive of providing appropriate bilingual education instruction for as long as the student can benefit from such a program.

Clearly 38 percent of Texans polled staked out a position indicating that they favored three or more years of bilingual instruction for LEP pupils – contrasted with the 27 percent who indicated they were strongly opposed to the program. In contrast to the reactionary populations in California, Texans seemed much more cautious in their stance on the best ways for providing appropriate instruction to children while they are learning English.

The fact that only one in four respondents would immerse Texas' LEP pupils in "sink or swim" approaches, or that only one in four would limit participation to one year before subjecting children to such high stakes treatment (which research has shown to be dysfunctional and ineffective), can be viewed as encouraging. Any public official aspiring to hold statewide office will want to note that a position on this issue could help to garner support, yet it might alienate a larger number of potential supporters – a no-win position for most elected officials.

A much larger issue emerges as we engage in increasingly bitter debates on the future of educational policy in this country. An important omission in the reporting is the lack of detail on how the questions were framed, who supported or opposed the program, and where the support for or opposition to the program originated. I would venture to suggest that the majority of those favoring the use of bilingual approaches were individuals, friends, or relatives and co-workers of families whose children were directly affected, while the majority of the opposition came from those who held opinions on the issue but had no perceived direct personal stake involved in the outcomes.

Perhaps we should weigh the impact of such polls against the views of people who are directly affected by the proposed reforms (the children and families of those involved). We should give greater voice to those whose lives may be most directly altered. Precedence for parent preferences on programs to be provided by schools to pupils with unique needs has been historically recognized in some programs. It has even been required in some legislation. For example, there is the persons-with-disabilities legislation dating back to the 1960s that has been incorporated in most state programs serving LEP pupils.

Regardless of who opposes and who supports certain educational approaches, it is time for all of us to question the validity of developing education policy on the basis of public opinion polls. Let research evidence and the views of the families directly affected help guide the making of life-altering decisions involving our children.

History has shown us that education strategies that call for immersing children into the curriculum when they do not know the dominant language (without allowing an opportunity to ease this transition by providing some years of native language instructional support) fail for the great majority of students. Extraordinarily high dropout rates and unacceptably low levels

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of performance are guaranteed with English-immersion programs for LEP pupils. On the other hand, research by many respected educators (among them, Cummins, Collier and Garcia) has long demonstrated that providing multi-year effective bilingual education programs produces better academic results for LEP pupils throughout the duration of their schooling.

Failure for any child in this country is unacceptable – and adoption of public education policies that will exacerbate rather than improve schooling outcomes for LEP pupils is similarly unacceptable. It is time for critics of bilingual education to offer a more effective strategy for educating LEP pupils (something other than the failed immersion policies of bygone eras) or to work with advocates on the process of improving instruction for all students. LEP children deserve better than serving as the pawns of or lightning rods for misguided or mean-spirited opinions of adults. These adults, after voicing their opinions, can go on their way, seemingly untouched by the impact of their opinions. In contrast, millions of LEP students suffer at the hands of those opinions.

The rest of the civilized world must smile as U.S. citizens engage in this contentious debate over language instruction, while Europeans and others maintain their long-standing support for learning multiple languages. Will we succumb to small minds and insecure thoughts? Perhaps the feisty national mood is reflective of a seemingly endless economic stability and the absence of major threats from abroad – a combination that fuels an arrogance that does not serve our nation well. For, as the wealthy accumulate a disproportionate share of the nation's resources and many others sit comfortably in their gated communities, we must never forget the millions upon millions of citizens, many of them children and youth, who do not partake of this great bounty. For most of these young people, a high quality and appropriate educational program is the difference between a life of wanting and a place at the table that celebrates the American Dream. Such life-altering decisions must be handled carefully, and those professionals who best know the issues should be given a major role in deciding the course of action.

Certainly, individuals would not want public opinion to be used to guide doctors in deciding a course of treatment for a relative or friend. Similarly, public opinion should not be used to frame appropriate instruction for any student. If such strategies had been used to guide U.S. efforts to segregate its schools, we would still be mired in misguided debates over separate and equal schooling. If we had been guided by public opinion, our schools might still be omitting any discussion of the theory of evolution (as many continue to insist on such an omission even to this day).

Let us sit and reason together and work to ensure that all children can be successful in our great country. Where there is data that can lead to the improvement of instruction for LEP pupils, let us improve the programs serving these students. Where we have evidence that supports the ineffectiveness of many old alternatives that some uninformed or ill-intentioned groups espouse, we should refrain from implementing them. As Dr. José A. Cárdenas would continuously caution, whatever is done in the name of educational innovation should at a minimum be guaranteed to cause no harm to students. We owe that assurance to ourselves, but most of all we owe it to all children, including those who are in the process of learning.

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Faster than a Plymouth *- continued from page 2*

delivery of quality educational opportunities to all students.

NCEEA noted that to achieve the high standards, several strategies would need to be conceptualized and implemented regarding

- equitable school management processes;
- culturally relevant, coherent, adaptive learning environments;
- inclusive community support and involvement; and
- equity, not equality, in school finance.

In 1993, Congress was not prepared to support the Opportunity to Learn Standards. Maybe the idea was too new for some legislators. Maybe it was too overwhelming. Maybe some thought that implementing the standards would be too costly. Whatever the reason, the language was dismissed from the legislation and the discussion.

It seems to me, however, that we now have a history in school reform, ESEA reauthorization, high standards and information that has been collected since 1994 with the implementation of the reauthorized ESEA. I saw evidence that some of the people around the discussion table in Washington understood that it is ridiculous to talk about all students achieving at high levels if we are not also willing to implement Opportunity to Learn Standards.

There were big-city and inner-city superintendents and those from poor and rural school districts who understood that concept. There were representatives from minority advocacy organizations who understood that. There were representatives at the round table discussions speaking to the needs of poor children, linguistically different and immigrant children – all of whom seemed to understand that. There were equity and desegregation assistance center directors who understood that.

Still, there were more people around the table who just could not go so far to say that all students should be held to high standards and that the language regarding Opportunity to Learn Standards must also become a part of the reauthorization legislation of the ESEA in 1999.

We have a year to correct the "oversight" regarding the Opportunity to Learn Standards. We have a year to help decision makers at the local, state and national levels understand that simply *saying* all learners should achieve high academic outcomes means nothing if there are not equitable inputs and structural processes in place to create equitable opportunities to learn. I hope decision makers "get it" this time around.

Our airplane landed in Atlanta. As we were filing out, I turned to the mother and said that she must have been really proud of her child; he was quite a little wonder. I thanked them both.

"For what?" she queried.

"Oh, just for providing me with an opportunity to learn that planes really do go faster than Plymouths."

Resources

National Coalition of Education Equity Advocates. *Educate America: A Call for Equity in School Reform* (Chevy Chase, Maryland: The Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium, 1994).

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Timeline of the Modern Standards-Based Reform Movement

A Nation At Risk
This publication was the catalyst for revisiting the way schools educate students, which led to the standards movement in recent years. The report linked the country's academic under-achievement and national economic jeopardy. Its recommendations were not radically different from current practices (Wheelock, 1995).

1983

Improving America's Schools Act
The *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* was renewed with an allocation of $10 billion to promote school reform efforts at the state and local levels (U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

1991

Goals 2000: Educate America Act
This legislation was a direct outcome of the recommendations from the Education Summit of 1989. The act also mandated the creation of the National Education Standards and Improvement Council (NESIC) to provide oversight to the development of standards across the country and to provide a type of certification of the standards developed by the states (Marzano and Kendall, 1996).

1994

National Academy of Sciences
Due to the success of the NCTM report, the National Academy of Sciences urged Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander to underwrite the development of standards for other content areas.

1989

Curriculum and Evaluation of Standards for School Mathematics
Developed over eight years by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), this publication redefined math standards to introduce math concepts to students at much earlier ages than before and to place less focus on the mere memorization of abstract formulas.

Education Summit
President George Bush called a summit of the nation's governors to address the direction of education in the nation. Participants developed six broad goals to be reached by the year 2000. Two of those goals specifically addressed expectations for increased achievement. While states like California, Wisconsin and Maryland were already developing academic standards, the education summit spurred other states to follow suit.

1992

Raising Standards for American Education
Released by the National Council on Education Standards and Testing, this report took a critical look at the progress of the standards-setting movement and concluded that "schools lacked coherence and insufficiently ambitious standards weakened education across the country." As a result, the federal government funded efforts by discipline-based professional organizations and states to advance the development of standards (U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

1993

Promises to Keep
Released by the National Education Goals Panel, this report proposed criteria for setting standards that would guide states and districts in developing their own content standards (Wheelock, 1995).

Making Standards Matter
This first report was released by the American Federation of Teachers. The annual reports are designed to analyze the quality of the academic standards and to monitor the extent to which those standards will drive major changes in the schools (American Federation of Teachers, 1996).

1995

Nation Standards in American Education: A Citizen's Guide
This book by former Assistant Secretary of Education, Diane Ravitch, was released. She is credited as being the primary "architect" of the modern standards movement.

– compiled by Anna Alicia Romero, Intercultural Development Research Association

Marzano, R.J. and J.S. Kendall. *The Fall and Rise of Standards-Based Education* (Alexandria, Virginia: National Association of State Boards of Education, 1996).
Wheelock, A. *Standards-Based Reform: What Does it Mean for The Middle Grades?* (New York, N.Y.: Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, September 1995).
U.S. Department of Education. *Improving America's Schools: A Newsletter on Issues in School Reform* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Spring 1996).
American Federation of Teachers. *Making Standards Matter 1996* (Washington, D.C.: American Federation of Teachers, August 1996).

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efforts.

The development of standards had broad-based appeal. Standards enabled policy-makers to "check up" on their charges (schools and students) and make sure they were doing what was expected. They also appealed to parents, for much the same reason. Standards appealed to business leaders who felt the need for the creation of some indicators of performance, a practice not unknown in many private sector operations.

The creation of standards sets in motion a series of actions and, eventually, reactions on the part of many school constituencies. While the beginning of the conversation tends to focus on individual student's performances on specific measures aligned to state or local standards, it only takes a small step to begin compiling aggregates of pupils at the classroom, school and district level based on those measures of performance. Thus, what begins as an assessment of student performance often ends up including an assessment of performance by schools and school districts, as judgments are made on the relative effectiveness of specific sites.

It is entirely appropriate to compile and analyze the performance of classes and schools in order to gain insights into which schools and teachers are succeeding in meeting the stated standards, as well as those places that may be falling short of expected performance levels. Many states have developed rating systems and other accountability mechanisms that are designed to hold schools accountable for producing desired results.

The extent to which the progress of whole schools and important subgroups of students within schools can be measured in any standards-grounded effort can have a great impact on the extent to which such efforts improve performance for all students, rather than limiting their benefits to White, middle-class pupils in those systems. One result of such standards-driven school accountability can be a heightened awareness and concern for the collective performance of all pupils attending specific schools and districts. In some instances the development of uniform standards has fostered the development of high expectations for all students. This in turn has contributed to heightened efforts to better serve school populations that had been historically underserved, or ill-served, by the public school system.

In some instances, scores on standards-driven systems are often reported in the *aggregate*; that is, they are reported in a manner such that the performance of subgroups of students is not presented or is easily extracted from the numbers that are reported. Examples of composite scores include such practices as the reporting of the overall mean for a school or district, or the percentage of all students meeting selected standards (minimum, mastery or exemplary performance thresholds). While offering a good summary statistic of overall school performance, composite measures of school performance can also serve to mask underachievement among identifiable subgroups, including migrant, minority, low-income and limited-English-proficient students.

Many states address this issue by requiring the reporting of *disaggregated* data – data reported in a way that allows one to analyze the relative performance of an array of subgroups that may make up a total school's enrollment. In Texas, the recognition that subgroup performance can lead to classifying a school or district as "low performing," or impact a school's rating as "recognized" or "high performing," has contributed to increased efforts to raise the levels of academic achievement for all students – including those pupils who were not well served previously.

Thus even today, standards can serve as targets that are used to guide local, state and national efforts. They can serve as benchmarks, measures of where we are and where we need to go. The trouble is that, unless there is a broad-based understanding and people "buy into" what they are, how they are measured and what the consequences of not meeting them are, standards alone can really do little to actually improve school and student outcomes. In fact, their creation can and often does nontraditional pupils as much harm as good. Why does the creation of standards sometimes not work and at times result in unintended consequences?

Potential Negative Consequences of Standards

While the use of standards to frame performance objectives can result in school and student improvement, standards sometimes lead to negative consequences for pupils. Recently Texas' governor announced a proposal that called for the retention of all third-grade pupils who did

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Challenges of Standards-Based School Reform

Standards reflect a more comprehensive view of the student as a learner. Nationally, standards are being developed to correlate with the various dimensions of learning that prepare students to meaningfully participate in the 21st century. Marzano et al. identify five dimensions of learning based on the five types of thinking essential for successful learning.

- **Positive attitudes and perceptions about learning** are prerequisites to learning. Students learn when the right attitudes and perceptions about learning are present. These are reflected in high expectations and positive self-concept theories.
- **Acquiring and integrating knowledge** refers to the ability to access related prior knowledge and integrate new knowledge into one's repertoire of content, skills, and processes.
- **Extending and refining knowledge** acknowledges the potential of the individual to make connections with prior knowledge to create new knowledge.
- **Using knowledge meaningfully** refers to the use of this new knowledge to problem-pose and solve.
- **Productive habits of the mind** are habits used by "critical, creative, and self-regulated" thinkers.

This more comprehensive view of learning implies that schools will operate differently, and the delivery of instruction will change considerably.

Marzano, R.J. and D. Pickering and J. McTighe. *Assessing Student Outcomes: Performance Assessment Using the Dimensions of Learning Model* (Alexandria, Virginia: National Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1993).

Coming Up!

In October, the *IDRA Newsletter* focuses on school reform.

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not pass the state's assessment of basic skills. This sweeping proposal would have ignored the fact that many students had passed all their classes but happened to do poorly on the exam. It also ignored research indicating the ineffectiveness of in-grade retention. This proposal was widely criticized, and it triggered long-standing concerns about high-stakes assessment and the use of any single measure to determine a student's standing in school.

Historically, *students* were the only entities held accountable for achieving certain outcomes. It is only recently that the public has demanded and acquired an accountability process that holds *schools* and *districts* accountable for the outcomes that they produce in students.

A large number of states around the country continue to use dysfunctional policies, wherein only the pupils pay any consequence for failing to meet certain performance expectations, while the personnel in schools and school districts are excluded from such consequences.

IDRA proposes that the achievement of the desired outcomes framed in state and national standards are a joint venture involving many parties, but particularly school staff, students and their families. The inability to perform at desired levels thus should also be considered a shared responsibility, including the responsibility to develop strategies to address any lack of achievement documented in the accountability process.

In addition to requiring the participation of numerous stakeholders, the success of standards-based efforts requires attention to the factors and conditions leading to the outcomes that are ultimately measured. Describing the components of a model for a balanced, inclusive accountability system, the Center for Educational Outcomes proposes a model composed of three interrelated components that include *system accountability*, *individual student accountability*, and *input and/or process accountability*. In addition to focusing on the traditional systemic and student accountability dimensions, the model acknowledges the need to assess the inputs that produce standards-based outcomes.

In such a comprehensive approach, stakeholders can examine information on factors such as teacher credentials and experience, financial resources available, and support mechanisms provided for both students and staff. Access to such critical input data provides the detail needed to address schools that require improvement, and to support and sustain those critical elements in schools that may be producing desired results.

Merely documenting that schools or students are not succeeding without isolating the related causal factors does an injustice to schools and students. Failure to acknowledge, target and support improvement in local school sites can lead to the evolution of dysfunctional systemic responses.

Exemptions and Exclusion of Students and Schools from Assessment of Performance

While one obvious response to meeting state and local standards is an increased amount of attention paid to having all pupils achieve to high standards, an unfortunate alternative too often pursued by some people involves finding ways to exclude harder-to-educate pupils from participating in the local or state accountability process.

A not-uncommon conversation that follows the development of state standards and related processes for assessing achievement involves ways to exclude pupils (or even whole schools) from the standards measurement system. While the exclusion of a handful of students for whom some uniform standard may be inappropriate is acceptable (and even in those cases, the process should involve the participation of an informed group of stakeholders, as in the ARD process used in special education), history has proven that the number of exclusions is commensurate with the extent to which key decision makers believe that those standards should be expected of and achieved by all students and schools. Unfortunately, in too many cases, determination of who achieves state and national standards can become a shell game where the claims are overstated by the exclusion of large numbers from the measurement process.

In Texas in the aftermath of the development of the TEKS, that spell out performance expectations for all Texas pupils in grades kindergarten through 12, the state tried to determine which types of students should be excluded from the state assessments that were aligned to those standards. After significant numbers of pupils of different types (migrant, limited-English-proficient and others) were found to have been excluded from the state testing process, state lawmakers adopted policy reforms that provided for greater inclusion of such special groups in the assessment system. These steps included providing flexibility for when pupils were assessed (in the case of migrant pupils), developing measures of content mastery in Spanish for students served in the state's bilingual education programs, and triggering state education agency reviews in those schools or districts with excessive numbers of exemptions. A more recent incentive includes the consideration of the number or percent of student exemptions from the state testing process in determining whether selected schools would be accorded special recognition and/or designation by the state agency.

The recent explosion in the number of students referred to alternative education programs – disciplinary programs for students who have violated school codes of conduct – has also created a new venue for excluding selected pupils from state and local performance measures. In Texas, the alternative education programs have even developed their own "alternative accountability" systems that allow them to set different (and lower standards) for pupils referred to such programs. The referrals to disciplinary alternative education programs in Texas are approaching 100,000 pupils, and involve disproportionate numbers of students who are poor or minority.

The extent to which the assessment and accountability systems allow for the significant exclusion of pupils or schools from a uniform performance assessment system determines the extent to which those standards are perceived as uniform and applicable to all pupils and schools, rather than as a sham accountability system sold to the public. Furthermore, the extent to which it is real or merely looks good on the surface depends on the extent to which key stakeholders – particularly parents – are willing to hold all schools accountable. They must also be willing to look beyond the standards-related outcomes to the inputs made available to schools and communities. They must be willing to hold themselves and the state accountable for the inputs that contribute to producing the outcomes desired. Our students deserve no less than attention to both.

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Challenges as We Enter a New Century: Standards-Based School Reform

For 25 years, IDRA has focused on the quality of education for *all* children. We have seen the negative effects of changing educational standards without providing appropriate instruction and resources. When Texas initiated mandated testing in the late 1970s, IDRA was concerned that schools would penalize children rather than find appropriate ways to teach them. The first test, Texas Assessment of Basic Skills (TABS), showed such results: poor and minority students scored significantly lower than White, middle-class children. There is nothing inherently inferior or wrong with any of the children – schools have not generally figured out how to teach them.

IDRA has continued to support high standards with appropriate support. Our battle has been on the side of curriculum and instruction modification, school organization and teacher preparation so that all children not only can meet but also can surpass the standards. We see the issue as a series of facts and challenges:

- ***Fact:*** Standards reflect a more comprehensive view of the student as a learner. Nationally, standards are being developed to correlate with the various dimensions of learning that prepare students to meaningfully participate in the 21st century. ***Challenge:*** Schools have neglected to create an informed constituency and community will for reform. We must create a greater awareness of the dimensions of learning as a base for standards. This challenges the deeply ingrained misconception that school learning is merely the acquisition and regurgitation of facts.
- ***Fact:*** Standards are discipline specific (language arts, mathematics, science and social studies) and generic (applicable to all disciplines). They are also developed to address attitudes, perceptions and habits of learning. ***Challenge:*** Schools must communicate this new emphasis to prepare students to assume responsibility for their learning and advancement to their families and the community at-large.
- ***Fact:*** Raising standards without concomitant support for teachers and students only increases the number of students failing and does not increase learning. ***Challenge:*** Schools must develop networks of support that advocate excellent education for all children and the necessary training and support needed by teachers to teach all children.
- ***Fact:*** Standards too often are developed with minimal input, if any, from parents, particularly minority parents. ***Challenge:*** We must create a dialogue between community and schools about learning, comprehension standards and the shared responsibilities for ensuring that children are prepared for the intellectual and economic demands of the 21st century.
- ***Fact:*** Standards that ignore or do not adequately address serving students whose primary language is not English, hinder the academic achievement of many children. ***Challenge:*** We must ensure that schools use the first language of the child to accelerate content learning and English as a second language approaches to accelerate English language acquisition.

IDRA's *Hispanic Families as Valued Partners: An Educator's Guide* documents a belief system present in many schools that views families as deficits based on their assumptions of low-income and minority communities. Our research and experience indicates that most parents have a deep and almost desperate faith in the possibilities of education and the promises held out to children who receive an excellent education.

In its *Community Leadership for Standards Based Reform Project* (funded by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation), IDRA has supported a school district's middle school reform efforts to be more effective through parental involvement and leadership. Through the National Coalition of Advocates for Students' *Mobilization for Equity* project (funded by The Ford Foundation), IDRA engages the public and parents in achieving the best possible education for all students. Supporting students to achieve high standards is a major focus of the parent leaders.

IDRA will continue to find solutions to these and other challenges, solutions that promise to set a new standard for all children – a standard of vision, hope, equity and excellence.

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